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ABSTRACT

This study examined the ways that theories of assimilation and identification could be applied to Dominicans in New York, discussing the different systems and histories of race relations and classifications. Data came from interviews with 21 adolescents and young adults categorized as first generation; generation 1.5 (youth who had lived in the United States slightly more than half of their lives); second generation; and apolitical (older first generation immigrants who demonstrated a lower acceptance of African heritage and much less liberal racial views). Results indicated that family, peers, and community played large roles in encouraging pride in Dominican heritage. First generation Dominicans tended to emphasize their immigrant orientation, generation 1.5 youth tended to be Dominican oriented, and the second generation was slowly moving toward an identification by American terms. Respondents demonstrated a positive self-image and pride in their ethnic background, recognizing the African contribution to Dominican culture and race. They emphasized that identity should be left for the individual to decide, defying assimilation and American classification systems on many levels. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES OF DOMINICANS IN NEW YORK CITY

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The Racial and Ethnic Identities of Dominicans in New York City

The Dominican Population in New York City

Merengue, *salsa* and *bachata* pour onto the sidewalks where men play *domino*, drink *Presidente* beer and talk politics. Street vendors sell *frio friós* and hot *pastelillos de carne* while restaurants advertise *comida tipica*: *arroz con habichuelas*, *carne guisada*, and *sancocho*. No, this isn't Santo Domingo, this is a little piece of *la capital* and *El Cibao* transplanted in New York City. Welcome to Washington Heights, where anything Dominican can be found except for the climate. In this re-creation of a little Dominican Republic, one is never more than a stone's throw away from an authentic Dominican meal, a Dominican owned and operated taxi, the day's newspaper flown in direct from the island and a social club of guys from the old neighborhood (Duany 1994).

Dominicans, who began migrating in the 1960s, are now one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the United States and the largest immigrant group in New York City (Pessar 1995, 1). By 1990, the number of Dominicans in New York City alone had reached more than 332,000 (Hernández, Rivera-Batiz, &

Roberto Agodini 1995, 7). Yet Dominicans are only one of the dozens of immigrant groups in New York; what makes their case special when it comes to ethnic and racial identity?

> "I have friends that [in the Dominican Republic] considered themselves white. When they came to this country they realized that they were not white. So, for many of our people the contact here has made them discover themselves a bit and begin to concern themselves with who they are. (translation)"

This quote, by a Dominican immigrant, states succinctly the dilemma faced by many of her compatriots. When immigrating to this country, Dominican immigrants and their children are confronted with completely different conceptualizations of race that don't fit the ideas of their native country or the ways Dominicans identify themselves. While the majority of Dominicans are not considered racially black in their homeland, many Dominican immigrants are viewed as black by mainstream American society and thus face a great deal of racial discrimination, in addition to the discrimination faced as a result of their immigrant and ethnic status. Many Dominicans who immigrate to the United States face not only a culture shock, but also an identity shock as they move from a continuous system of racial categorization to a dichotomous system.

As in the United States, race relations and classifications in the Dominican Republic have extensive histories with origins dating back to the distinct forms of colonization and slavery in the two countries. How do these conceptualizations of race and identity impact the experiences of immigration and assimilation of Dominicans? Into what groups will they choose to assimilate, if at all? How do these different conceptualizations affect the way that Dominican immigrants and their children identify in terms of race and ethnicity? Will they have "ethnic options" or will their identities be imposed on them based on American conceptualizations of race (Waters 1990)? This presentation will examine the ways in which Dominicans in New York City[1] negotiate the various systems of racial classification and construct their own identities.

A large portion of data for this presentation is based on personal interviews with Dominican immigrants and their children residing in the City of New York. Interviews were conducted from 1996-98 with a small sample of Dominicans from a local congregation, students from a number of high schools and

[1]References to New York are meant to signify the metropolitan area and not the state as a whole.

colleges, a Dominican community and cultural organization, and various social contacts. [2]

This paper will examine the ways that theories of assimilation and identification can be applied to Dominicans in New York. A brief explanation of the different systems and histories of race relations and classifications is discussed. An overview of Dominican identity formation in the Dominican Republic serves as a segue to the ways that first and second generation Dominican immigrants perceive themselves in America.

Residential Segregation and Socio-economic Status

Denton and Massey have studied the differences in racial segregation between white and black Hispanics in this country. They found that, "black Hispanics are very segregated and are much more like U.S. blacks than white Hispanics" (1989). The degree of residential segregation demonstrates that black Hispanics

[2] While performing personal interviews allows an in-depth look at the life experiences of real people, with a total sample of 31 participants it is not feasible to make generalizations to a larger and more diverse population. For a broader perspective, written material on immigration and racial and ethnic self-identification of Dominicans as well as Puerto Ricans and West Indians has been investigated.

are only accepted as neighbors by American blacks and that "they appear to be on the way to becoming part of the general U.S. black population." In contrast, white Hispanics are living away from black residential areas and are more likely to live in their own neighborhoods or closer to whites.

As a result of Dominican segregation from whites and residential proximity to blacks, their daily interactions with Americans are more likely to translate into interactions with African Americans. On the part of Dominicans, the efforts to differentiate themselves from African Americans may lead them away from assimilation with them culturally, at least among the older generations. At the same time, many Dominicans born in the United States and raised in black neighborhoods pick up the dress, speech, and musical preference of African Americans.

Assimilation and the "Old" Immigrants

Many of the early theories about immigration and identity are limited in their applicability to the Dominican immigrant because they did not focus on the confounding matter of race. According to straight-line theory, the first generation of immigrants will only assimilate to a certain extent but the

following generations born and raised in America will gradually assimilate more and more until they are no longer distinguishable from mainstream society. This indistinguishability was based on the fact that these immigrants were phenotypically similar to the white American population.

Milton Gordon, in his book *Assimilation in American Life* , does not view America as truly a great "melting pot" due to the cultural retention on the part of some groups that may be considered "unmeltables." Two factors that may significantly decrease the speed and level of assimilation in America are spatial isolation or segregation of a minority group, and extensive discrimination—obstacles commonly faced by Dominican immigrants.

The New Immigrants and the Color Problem

Mary Waters has studied the assimilation and ethnic identities of black immigrants from the non-Spanish Caribbean (1994). She found that in the first generation immigrants hold on to their island identity and emphasize hard work and education as a means for advancement. The majority of these immigrants do not lose their accents and many differentiate themselves from African

Americans by maintaining a style of clothing more similar to that of their country of origin. Part of this distancing from black Americans is a reflection of the negative stereotypes that Caribbeans have of members of this group.

Waters found that "The ways in which these youngsters experience and react to racial discrimination influences the type of racial/ethnic identity they develop" (802). For example, youth who identified themselves with black Americans, tend to see more racial discrimination and limited opportunities for blacks. In contrast, the ethnic identified youth tend to believe that there are many opportunities and rewards for individuals who take initiative. The self-identification of these youth was also closely linked to their socio-economic status. The majority of middle-class young people identify themselves ethnically. The poorest students, in contrast, tend to identify as American blacks or with their status as immigrants. Those that identify as American were also most likely to be born in the United States.

History of Race Relations in the DR

While patterns of assimilation among Dominicans have been given more attention in recent years, the problem of racial

and ethnic identification has yet to be addressed. The histories of race relations in these countries have had an undeniable impact on how Dominicans view themselves in terms of race and ethnicity.

Whereas in the Caribbean a light-skinned person with one black great-grandparent would in many cases be considered white, in America he or she would undoubtedly be defined as black. While Americans tend to view race as something biological, the Spanish Caribbean conceptualization of race "has emphasized the dimensions that are freely varying, such as physical appearance (as opposed to genetic make-up), social class, and cultural modes of behavior" (Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992).

The histories of these two countries developed in two different directions, one towards interracial tolerance and mixing with a categorical continuum of race (the Dominican Republic) and the other away from tolerance of, and mixing with other races and a dichotomous racial categorization (the United States).

Dominican Racial Identity

Despite the high percentage of mulatto and black people and history of racial mixing, the country's former president, Joaquin Balaguer, states vehemently that the Dominican Republic

is and always has been a white and Christian country. He argues that with the exception of a "minuscule" portion of the population, the black presence in the country represents a foreign intrusion that basically translates into "Haitian." He describes the threat of Haitian imperialism and "Africanization" as having a biological and cultural impact on the Dominican Republic. Balaguer writes that "if the government continues to ignore the problem of race, the white race will eventually be absorbed by the African" (Márquez 1992).

According to César Mieses, a professor of anthropology at John Jay University, Dominicans lack a well-defined racial identity as a result of their self-negation and the government's racist policies. He cites the rejection of their black origins and negation of the culture and history Africans brought to the island as two prime examples. Mieses also recognizes the role of the predominantly white oligarchy in their project to negate their African heritage and invention of the racial category *indio* to describe skin color, centuries after the complete annihilation of Indians on the island. At a forum on "Racism and Racial Identity among Dominicans," Mieses stated that the lack of racial acceptance that these negations implicate, "...generates an identity

crisis that makes racism towards black people implicit, and identifies Haitians as the sole representatives of that color in the country" (Vallenilla 1994, translation).

THE FIRST GENERATION

Dominican immigrants to New York move from a system in which skin color is described through a richly textured vocabulary to one that is strictly defined as either black or white. The first generation's dilemma of conflicting identification is approached with creative solutions, sometimes incorporating new classifications, but more often than not relying on the labels used in their native country.

The Participants

The data used for this chapter is based on a sample of 21 interviewees and divided into three subsets: First Generation, Generation 1.5, and the Apolitical Group[3] (see Table 1).

[3] It should be noted that many of the attitudes expressed by these respondents are in some ways atypical of many first generation Dominicans. Three of the respondents, all female, attend a liberal highly politicized church, Santa Clara, whose congregation is deeply involved in fighting for social justice and celebrating African-Latino ancestry and solidarity among people of color. These interviewees demonstrate a radical racialized perspective that contrasts with the emphasis that most Dominicans put on ethnic over racial identity.

Interviews (N=8) were conducted with an older population of first generation immigrants. All participants in this set demonstrated a lower level of acceptance of African heritage and much less liberal racial views. This set will be referred to as the "Apolitical Group."

An additional group of participants (N=5) are considered to be part of "Generation 1.5." These individuals were youth that have lived in the United States slightly more than half of their lives. This set of interviewees share many commonalties with the first generation yet have many distinctions from older immigrants making them a transitional group.

The goal of these interviews was to obtain a deeper understanding of the multitude of factors influencing identity formation as well as resilience. These personal interviews and numerous informal conversations shed light on the experiences of Dominican immigrants and their children. These interviews illustrate the complexities and dilemmas of identity and the different ways these complexities are played out and confronted.

Latino-dominicano-inmigrante-minoria…

Respondents were asked how they identified themselves and were given a list of terms to put in order of priority as well the

opportunity to add their own categories. On the average, respondents identified themselves with about four of the labels, one of the first of many indicators of the complexity of Dominican identity. Table 2 is a checklist similar to the one shown to participants, arranged by order of most frequently used terms. In addition to a predominantly Dominican identity, first generation respondents viewed their immigrant status as an important part of their identity. Like the previous generation, Generation 1.5 respondents continue to stress an ethnic identification. All 1.5ers considered themselves Dominican. Latino and Hispanic were close seconds. Even though all respondents immigrated to this country, only one referred to himself as an immigrant. Members of this group were more likely to consider themselves Dominican-American, a trend that increases even further among the second generation. This group shows similarities with Water's "ethnic-identified" youth, while some of the individuals are moving towards a more "American-oriented" identity.

Not black, *indio*

Although Dominicans that were interviewed recognized the African contribution to their own phenotypes, they de-emphasized its importance by reference to the native Indian population.

Tommy, of the Apolitical Group, was one of the respondents who described himself as *indio* even while recognizing that there have not been Indians in the Dominican Republic for centuries. Yet the usage of the term *indio* is common among most Dominicans. Respondents emphasized that the racial ancestry of Dominicans is a mix of African, Spanish, and Indian and recognize that in the same family individuals can (and often times do) cover the spectrum of skin colors. Other Generation One and 1.5 participants used the following terms to describe their skin color: *morenito/indio quemado* [dark/burnt or brown Indian], medium, dark/*trigueña* [wheat colored], *canela* [cinnamon], *cafe con leche* [coffee and cream], and light/*jabao* [white-skinned with blond 'kinky' hair].

Respondents from the Apolitical Group pondered how to describe their color during the interviews and had difficulty describing their color succinctly. A common response was that their skin color fell somewhere between black and white, even though some of these respondents would not appear to be of mixed ancestry by the casual observer. The following is an example of how one member of the Apolitical Group grapples with describing

his skin color. Fello is a darker complexioned middle-aged man who has spend half of his life in the States:

> A. A lot of times people tell me that I'm not—see I don't look black—I'm not black. And I don't feel—I don't feel, I don't consider myself black.
>
> Q. How would you describe your skin color in Spanish?
>
> A. They call that…(hesitates) indio. Indio.
>
> Q. Indio is not lighter?
>
> A. Ahh, it's not really black but it's ahh like a reddish kind of skin—like it's not what you may consider umm— see like you know—you have different kind of black. You got black-black, like purple (laughs)… sometimes you got some people who are black. But a lot of time if I compare myself to those others who are darker than me—I mean I'm not—I'm not black.

While Fello insists that he is "not black" he also recognizes that he is viewed as such by others. This accounts for some of the difficulty he has in telling the interviewer that he doesn't consider himself black despite his black skin, recognizing the contradiction posed as a result of the American classification system that equates color with racial and ethnic identity. American classifications are not suitable for Fello's reality and thus it is much easier to describe himself in Spanish using the system that makes sense to him. With

one word in Spanish, *indio*, he sums up everything that he had stammered and strained to explain in English.

This is in vast contrast to the response of Ramón who is twenty-one years old and has lived here for two years. When asked about his skin color he responds immediately,

> **A.** *Indio achocolatado con sabor a canela* (Chocolate colored Indian with cinnamon flavor).
>
> **Q.** You've given this a lot of thought?
>
> **A.** This? My color? One hundred percent, I've spent 21 years thinking about it. I'm chocolate-colored-Indian-with-cinnamon-flavor, proudly Dominican by the grace of God (translation).

Although both of the above quotes utilize Dominican classifications and reject the categorization of black (explicitly or implicitly), the respondents demonstrate completely different attitudes towards their own skin color. Fello rejects American labels while describing himself by negation, he is neither African American (ethnically/racially) nor black (in color). Ramón, in contrast, makes no mention of black or African American and is confidently describes the color of his skin. These participants illustrate the gap between younger and older Dominicans, the contrasting positive and negative reactions to one's own skin color

even though they are both first generation. These differences will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Cuál es tu raza? **A**. La dominicana

When asked to identify their race, respondents answered almost unanimously, "Dominican." This is exemplary of the way racial categories are played down among Dominicans while cultural/ethnic aspects are emphasized. Not a single respondent stated that their skin color was part of their Dominican identity. Ethnicity was seen as detachable from race and references to color strongly emphasized the variety of skin colors found among Dominicans and the lack of a "prototypical" example. This is a vast contrast to the way Dominicans talk about Haitians, as if Haitian ethnicity, race, and color all boiled down to being black or African.

Ramón de-emphasizes race, stressing that regardless of skin color, we are all basically the same inside—a common Dominican idea. Ramón's comments are typical of the "immigrant-oriented" individual in that he stresses nationality and place of birth while feeling little pressure to choose a racial identification. Like the immigrant-identified youth in Waters' study, Ramón continues to have strong family roots on the island, plans to return there to live,

and maintains his ethnic identity through his style of clothing. According to Waters, another characteristic of immigrant-identified individuals is a feeling of differentness from or lack of identification with American blacks, as Fello made very apparent earlier.

Mejorando la raza

Many traditional parents continue to encourage their children to "*mejorar la raza*" (better the race) by marrying someone light-skinned and thus having lighter complexioned children. At the same time popular culture perpetuates racist and sexist notions that black women are *caliente* (hot) and *buenas en la cama* (good in bed). The double-standard in Dominican society puts much more pressure on women to improve the race. The men, "have the luxury of going out with whomever they wish," while women are berated for choosing dark-skinned partners.

Views of Other Groups

Although whites were not seen as having much in common with Dominicans, they were sometimes seen as a model to strive toward in that they were seen as hard-working, educated, and well-to-do. A few viewed the older generation as identifying more with whites and wanting to be more like whites. However, whites were

also viewed as having a tendency to discriminate against minorities and prejudge people on the basis of race. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Dominicans do not on the whole identify with a group that views them so negatively.

When asked about having anything in common with African Americans the majority responded that they do have some things in common. These commonalties ranged from they way they are viewed and treated by whites, to the ways they dress and have a good time. Most agreed that despite some feuding, Dominicans on the whole get along better with blacks than with whites. Although most of the respondents' friends are Dominican or other Latinos, a few have African American friends and none have close white friends. Some of the younger respondents noted that Dominicans are more likely to hang out with blacks and pick up on their speech and way of dress. Feelings of community with American blacks were found predominantly among youth regardless of their generation.

Remembering Racism on the Island

Participants gave numerous examples of the ways darker complexioned individuals are mistreated in the Dominican Republic. Most of the discrimination tends to be subtle, such as

putting white people in high visibility positions such as bank tellers and television news anchors and using stereotypical images in children's text books (such as white-skinned doctors and dark-skinned maids). Other respondents viewed racism in the Dominican Republic as blatant. One respondent explained that Dominicans are always looking for excuses to avoid viewing their dark-skinned country-mates as Dominican (i.e., if they are dark they are Haitian).

Several individuals believed that black/white dichotomies were explicitly stated in the Dominican Republic, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> **Interviewer**: Do you guys think it's really racist down there or not?
>
> **Amauri**: It's racist, but—It is racist. You know, like they teach you, as you grow up: Black is ugly. White is beautiful…

Dominican women are also under a lot of pressure to fit the model of beauty typified by the European woman. Women that are physically furthest from this model must make the most effort to de-emphasize their "unattractive" (i.e., African) features by chemically straightening and lightening their hair, bleaching their skin, and using light-colored contact lenses.

Passing on the Dominican Legacy

Another important aspect that was stressed is that their children should understand that they are Dominican and they have an obligation to the Dominican Republic. Esperanza had these hopes for her future children:

> They must always know that they are Dominican, even if they are born in China—if I'm Dominican by blood they are Dominican.

Similarly, Hortensia stated that,

> They must know that this is not their country, that their country is where I came from, Santo Domingo. And that they should do something in order for their country to progress.

THE SECOND GENERATION

The second generation straddles the boundaries between Dominican and American ideologies of race while dealing with the pressures of their families and their peers as well as the role of growing up in the inner-city environment of New York.

The Participants

In-depth interviews were conducted with seven individuals. Shorter interviews were conducted in groups (N=3). All of the interviewees had spent the majority of their lives in the U.S. The cumulative time spent in the Dominican Republic ranged from two

weeks to five years. The average time spent in the D.R. was about two years. While a few respondents had only spent a few weeks at a time on the island, the majority had spent full summers there and others had gone to school there for a few years, an indication that many of these interviewees are still closely tied to the Dominican Republic in their life experiences. A total of eight participants were interviewed individually or in groups at La Coalición, a Dominican cultural and community organization. These included all three generations (Second, 1.5, and First). All of these interviews were conducted in English.

Bettering the Race

Most respondents noted a large generation gap when it came to views on color and opinions of other ethnic groups. One major difference between the generations was in the usage of the phrase *mejorar la raza* (to better the race). While almost everyone was familiar with the expression, not everyone had been directly pressured to better the race. For others, parents' desires were expressed quite explicitly, "Marry a white man." Another respondent even suggested that his parents would disinherit him if he chose to be with a dark-skinned girl.

Almost half of respondents stated their preference for light/white skinned partners but none saw this as a reflection of their parent's views of bettering the race, with one exception. Mario, the darkest complexioned of the second generation set, has never dated a girl as dark as he is. All of his girlfriends have been light-skinned Hispanic or European-American. He didn't see any reason for this except that it was just his preference. Half-way through the interview when talking about a completely different subject he seemed to have a revelation:

> **A**: The problem—I'll go back to the beginning, the reason why I guess I prefer—wow, this just contradicts everything I've said so far. I think the reason why I prefer white chicks to dark skinned to black girls is because that's what I was taught. My father was married to a white woman. My mother is not white, but he was married to a white [Dominican] woman. And being raised by this woman I was taught that you have to marry a white girl so that you can "fix your race."
>
> **Q**: *Mejorar la raza.*
>
> **A**: Uh huh. And that's what I heard all my life.

Why did Mario's father tell his son, "You've got to marry a white woman. White women are the best" and then have several affairs with dark-skinned women? His actions might be interpreted as statements that white women are for marriage and black women

are for affairs. Maybe his father would have liked to marry a black woman, but being a dark-skinned man himself the only way for him to better the race was to marry white. The purpose of this is partially for social status and partially just to have "beautiful children." Status is elevated the most through legitimized relationships (such as marriage and having children).

Good Hair/Bad Hair

When Monica stopped chemically relaxing her hair the local women became perplexed. Monica became a source of preoccupation and a topic of gossip; maybe she wasn't well. Why else would she let her *pelo malo* (bad hair) grow naturally when she could simply straighten it and make it pretty like everyone else does?

> **A**: I'm not processing [my hair] anymore, I'm not straightening it anymore. So it's like a really big topic in my house because it's like, "Oh my god! *Pareces un toto¡* … You know, [you look] like a vagina. Straight up, that's what they say … But it's like they feel that I would be like "prettier" if I straightened my hair, if I did my hair nice. "Nice."

Ethnic Labels

As with the first generation, all interviewees were shown a list of ethnic descriptions and asked which they would use to

describe themselves. Like the previous generations, second generation respondents chose an average of four terms to describe themselves, demonstrating that ethnic identification may be neither more nor less complicated between the different interview sets (See Table 3). All participants for which data was collected (N=9) considered themselves Dominican (or some variation such as Dominican York or Dominican-American) and Latino (or Hispanic). Several people considered themselves Quisqueyano but marked only Dominican because they see them as the same. Many people referred to themselves as "Spanish," but only one added that to the list and most people preferred Latino or Hispanic. Several youth mentioned that they considered themselves black on some level, yet only two people added 'black' to their list of identities. In contrast to the first generation, many second generation interviewees considered themselves Dominican-American. The increasing use of this latter category parallels the American oriented identification described by Waters. Other terms were used fairly equally by both generations.

Dominican vs. American

Most youth that considered themselves Dominican-American felt no conflict in being bicultural or even members of

several groups simultaneously, although they noted that one identity may show through stronger than others. In most situations second generation interviewees continued to feel Dominican above all.

In contrast, Luis has encountered great difficulty growing up between cultures.

> **Q**: Are there times when being part of these different parts conflict?
>
> **A**: All the time. All the time. See because you're brought up like a Latino or a Dominican or what have you and then but you're brought up in America…and you're brought up to see a lot of things that are typically American or Anglo and then you try to apply those things to yourself and it sort of confused the hell out of you because you were brought up a different way and you're applying someone else's rules to the way you were brought up.

Luis further explained that being Dominican-American is an inseparable fusion, he couldn't choose one over the other because, "I don't know where Dominican ends and American begins or vice versa."

The Continuum Continues

Participants were also asked to describe their skin color in Spanish and English. In neither language did people describe their color in accordance with the American dichotomous system of

black versus white (with one exception). Interestingly, the number of different labels used in English were almost equal to the number used in Spanish (5 versus 6). In Spanish *blanquita* (white) was used once, but *negro* (black) was never used. If language is a reflection of culture, from these interviews we might ascertain that it is more acceptable to be 'black' in English, while in Spanish it is more acceptable to be 'blanca.' Since interviewees have shown use of language to be a marker of cultural identification, it is fitting that the use of Spanish would reflect Dominican systems of classification while the use of English conformed to American systems. Those who described their skin as dark in English used *moreno*, *indio*, or *trigueño* to describe their color in Spanish. *Indio claro/indio clarito* was usually used in reference to light skin.

The idea of identity being constructed from within, or subjectively, by Dominicans does not function as easily in the United States for people of color, whereas white Americans can pick and choose freely between the different ancestries that have contributed to their backgrounds and decide which ones they identify with most (Waters 1990). Racial minorities do not have the same options. This is because their identities tend to be socially constructed on the basis of skin color, an objective classification

made by an observer regardless of the subjective classification of the individual.

Yet, as Mario states emphatically, lumping African Americans and Dominicans together in one group on the basis of skin color would be to completely ignore the many cultural differences.

> I think that co-workers would…and they would like to categorize Latinos and Dominicans and everybody into one group and call it all 'Black' and I just have a hard time with that because I'm Latino and that's not the case because again 'cause of all the differences that I find between the two cultures. I just can't say 'Well, you know, I'm black period' because the color of my skin, there's a lot more to me than that.

Tony, a 1.5er, stated "My history tells me that I have something in common with a black, but not at all with whites." Few denied that Africans made large contributions to Dominican culture, especially in the music and sometimes in the food and, to a lesser extent, the language. And while noting a black influence on Dominican culture and recognizing that Dominicans are a racially mixed people, they for the most part did not consider themselves black. What at first glance may look like blatant denial of racial background is actually much more complex. These respondents are not denying the African contribution to Dominican culture and

many believe that they do have some black blood, but they don't necessarily see it as African. Just as some respondents believe that it is unlikely that they have a significant amount of Indian blood because they've never seen a real Taino, likewise some felt that they didn't really have African blood because they have never seen an African in the D.R. Interestingly, a number of respondents did not even refer to early inhabitants of the island as Africans but rather as African Americans or blacks. While the Indians may have disappeared through decimation, the Africans had disappeared through miscegenation. For some, the only Africans left on the island were the one's that speak Creole and cut cane— mostly on the other side of the *fronterra* in Haiti.

Contact with Non-Latinos and Views of These Groups

In contrast to their parents, the white people that Dominican youth came into contact with tended to be teachers, principals, and occasionally officers of law enforcement, all of whom are typically criticized for racist and discriminatory treatment. Since school staff and law enforcement officials are always in a position to discipline and because young people of color seem to receive a disproportionate amount of disciplinary action, it should not come as a surprise that Dominican youth don't

feel much affinity with whites. According to Monica the older generation would say, "We want to be like the white people." This contrasts greatly to how she feels the youth see whites. They think more along the lines of, "These white people are crazy," and "F—k the white man, let's do our own thing." For the most part, young people that had regular interactions with whites had them in a different context than the older generation, who were not as likely to be in confrontational situations.

When asked about African Americans having much in common with Dominicans, answers varied a great deal. Some felt that there were similarities in the culture, citing examples such as food, music, and family unity. Others saw blacks and Dominicans as sharing minority status and negative treatment by whites, "we're both underdogs" or "we're peons." Monica believed that Dominicans and African Americans shared many commonalties but didn't see them playing out:

> But it's not like we're tight. I don't feel it anyway, you know, and maybe it's becoming more now with younger people, but I don't feel like in general like there is any cohesion between blacks and Dominicans. I think that blacks see us as kind of like, you know, the competition kind of like, you know, we're fighting for crumbs type thing. And I don't think they like us at all and I can tell you right now, Dominicans don't like black people either.

Mario stated clearly, "I don't like the attitude of a Black woman...There's a certain attitude about the Black culture, the African American culture that just doesn't sit right with me." These attitudes not only describe the lack of cohesion between the two groups, but also reflect the way Dominicans distinguish themselves from American blacks. In this way even second generation Dominicans continue to reject a black American identification commonly found among West Indian and Haitian immigrants in the first (42%) and second generations (83%) (Waters 1994, p 802).

While a few respondents believed that Dominicans hung out with blacks because poverty had thrown them into the same neighborhoods, many also recognized that African Americans are trend setters in the music and fashion industry even outside the ghettoes. While some considered hanging out with whites or speaking like them as equivalent to 'selling out,' no one mentioned a similar criticism of listening to hip-hop or associating with mostly American blacks.

Conclusion

> Our reality requires its own explanation. We have no reason to submit ourselves to a model of analysis that promotes North American Afrocentrism nor the

> discourse of other nations whose historical evolution has been different from ours. (Torres-Saillant 1994, p. 49 translation)
>
> Wherever I go, wherever, no matter what, regardless, I'm still Dominican, that's the first thing. (Hortensia, first generation)

While level of contact with non-Latinos and time spent in the U.S. and the D.R. are definitely factors in processes of assimilation and identity formation, they may not be the most important factors. While youth involved in La Coalición felt that it positively impacted their identity and encouraged pride in being Dominican, the views of parents seemed to impact all respondents. Parents' ideas on improving the race and attitudes towards other racial groups often influenced how youth viewed the same topics, even though they didn't always realize it. Mario and Cynthia's preference for lighter skin partners did not necessarily agree with their peers' choices, but strongly reflected the pressure which other family members had put on them. At the same time, other youths stated that they would make their own decisions and take a color-blind perspective when it comes to love.

Without a doubt, family, peers, and community play a large role in encouraging pride in Dominican heritage. Parents pass down the Spanish language and want their children to speak it

well. Second generation youth who have the opportunity to teach the next generation English only, especially since that is the language most of them prefer to speak, choose not to do so. Almost all respondents in every interview set felt that the transmission of Spanish language and customs was very important and planned to do so with their own children. As long as parents continue to bring their children to the Dominican Republic, their children will continue to feel a stronger connection to their Dominican heritage.

We find that racial and ethnic identification of Dominicans in New York in many ways parallels the identities of the black second generation immigrant youth studied by Waters. While all interviewees strongly identify themselves as Dominican, the same three categories of identification can be seen in a basic generational pattern. First generation Dominicans tend to emphasize their immigrant orientation, generation 1.5 youth tend to be Dominican oriented, and the second generation is slowly moving towards an identification by American terms. Whether on the basis of racial identification (i.e., "I'm black") or ethnic identification ("I'm Dominican or Dominican-American"), we see this generation utilizing more mainstream classifications characterized by dichotomies and hyphens. Yet the process seems

to be occurring at a much slower rate than for English-speaking Caribbean immigrants, and language may be precisely the reason. A young Jamaican immigrant faces less obstacles to (black) American cultural and linguistic assimilation than does a Dominican immigrant who must learn a completely different language. At the same time, the size of the Latino population in New York (estimated at 25%) is likely to serve as a thicker buffer to contact with and assimilation to non-Latino culture.

While some academics, Dominican and other, have stressed the importance of Dominicans 'coming to terms' with their African ancestry and embracing their blackness in order to have a 'healthy' identity, the individuals who participated in this study did not on the whole demonstrate that their identity was anything less than healthy. On the contrary, dealing with conflicting Dominican and American identities as well as being young people of color is by no means an easy task, yet participants demonstrated a positive self image and pride in their ethnic background. Dominicans interviewed recognize the African contribution to Dominican culture and race, most accepting that 'black' blood runs in Dominican veins—including their own. Any negation of blackness is not a rejection of their own biological history, but rather a

rejection of being classified on American terms. The fact that some Dominicans may see their own skin color as dark, even black, while not identifying themselves as African Americans, is not a symptom of psychosis. Rather these Dominicans are making acute distinctions between color, race, and ethnicity that many Americans have failed to recognize. Being dark-skinned and of African descent does not make one African American, or to quote again, "It's not the color of the skin, but the customs."

Respondents emphasize that identity should be left for the individual to decide. They insist that identity comes from within and cannot be decided by anyone but the individual. Interviewees have stressed that personal preference for style doesn't mean denying or giving up your ethnic identity. Regardless of dress or speech, and regardless of the way they are viewed in terms of race by others, Dominicans defy assimilation on many levels and demonstrate that when it comes to identity it's what's inside that counts.

Identity is the way that we view ourselves and, ideally, all individuals should have the "ethnic options" that are granted to European Americans. While it is true that members of the same family with similar experiences can view themselves in completely

different ways, one cannot ignore the reality that identity is not created in a vacuum. Identity is also socially constructed, based not only in the perceptions of one's own ethnic group but also on the perceptions of the dominant group. These two perceptions may be in direct contradiction but it is the dominant group that tends to dictate for the society as a whole what identity is and should be. As a result of rigid, dichotomous racial classifications, members of different groups or cultures will often be classified by others in the same ways: Dominican and African American youth are one example. While individuals face different experiences throughout their identity formation and react to these experiences in different ways, it is ultimately the context that decides just how this identity will be expressed and classified. People living on the borderlands between two cultures will inevitably be influenced to varying degrees by both systems, members strongly rooted in one system or the other will strongly pressure others to identify on the terms dictated by their system. In both contexts we see an imposition of identity and the expectations that one's identity will conform to the patterns of the system. The inelasticity of American racial classifications severely limits the options of racial and ethnic identification for all people of color. Deciding for someone what

their racial or ethnic identity is or should be is a very personal impingement of freedom. In order to understand identity we must allow space for its creative expression and alternative classification, especially when it conflicts with mainstream classifications. In the "land of the free" an individual should not be denied the basic liberty of defining oneself.

Table 1

The Participants

	Sample Size	Years in U. S.	Age
First Generation	8	M = 4	14-44 (M = 19)
Generation 1.5	5	M = 12	14-25 (M = 21)
Apolitical Group	8	M = 16	20-55 (M = 40)
Second Generation	10	M = 16	14-24 (M = 18)

Table 2

Most Frequently Used Terms to Describe Identity

First Generation (N = 8)		Generation 1.5 (N = 5)	
Number of Responses M = 4		Number of Responses M = 4	
Latino	100%	Dominican	100%
Dominicano/a	100%	Hispanic	80%
Quisqueyano/a	?	Latino	80%
Inmigrante	63%	Quisqueyano	?
Minoria	35%	Dominican- American	40%
Dominican-American	13%	Minority	20%
Hispano/a	8%	Immigrant	20%
Norteamericano/a	0%	Dominicanyork	20%
Dominicanyork	0%	American	0%

Table 3

Most Frequently Used Terms to Describe Identity

Second Generation, N = 9

Number of Responses M = 4

Latino/a	100%
Dominican	89%
Dominican-American	44%
Hispanic	33%
Minority	33%
American	22%
Dominican York	11%
Immigrant	11%
Quisqueyano	?

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